

Pakistan's Energy Crisis and U.S. Interests

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On 7 October 2001, the opening phase of “Operation Enduring Freedom” U.S. military campaign began, which quickly drove the Taliban and its al-Qaida affiliates from Kabul on 12 November.

Since then, 1,760 U.S. troops have been killed in Afghanistan along with 942 International Security Assistance Force soldiers, a total of 2,702 foreign military dead, with no end in sight.

In a March 2008 article Richard Holbrooke, then a foreign policy adviser in Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign, coined the term “Af-Pak” in an article to describe the broader regional context of military operations in Afghanistan, acknowledging that in order to win in Afghanistan, Pakistan to the east must be pacified as well.

Holbrooke’s neologism was a belated acknowledgement that U.S. military operations had in fact begun across the Durand Line, the Afghan-Pakistan border in 2004, which Pashtuns on both side of the border have regarded as an artificial construct since its unilateral declaration by British authorities in India in 1893. In 2004 the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s Special Activities Division undertook the attacks on targets in northwest Pakistan using unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) drones, primarily in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along northwest Pakistan’s Afghan border.

Carried out with the connivance of Pakistani President Asif Zadari, the UAV attacks have intensified, greatly increasing anger throughout FATA.

Now however, there are faint glimmers of new thinking in Washington that two new weapons for the “hearts and minds” of Pakistanis may have appeared – the light bulb, and potable water.

If all goes well, then the U.S. government is to sign off on providing Islamabad with \$1 billion to complete its Diamer-Bhasha dam, with the offer reportedly being finalized during the upcoming Pakistan-U.S. strategic dialogue on energy later this month. If approved, the project will be the U.S. government’s largest foreign aid project to Pakistan.

The Diamer-Bhasha dam straddles the Indus River in Pakistan’s Gilgit-Baltistan region of occupied Kashmir. The Diamer-Bhasha dam when complete would both produce 4,500 megawatts of electricity as well as store 8.5 million acre feet of water that Pakistan could use for irrigation and drinking.

What is most extraordinary about Washington’s purported efforts is not only that it is willing to delve into the Pakistani energy cesspool, but it is willing to do so in an area that has been

contested by Pakistan and India since 1947, the major source of Muslim guerrilla insurgency for the last 64 years.

Apparently there are elements in Washington's bureaucracy realizing that Pakistan's population's increased access to reliable electricity and water sources are in fact useful corollaries to UAV strikes in wining "hearts and minds."

It is not as if Pakistan's energy woes are new – since 2006 Pakistani energy analysts have warned of an impending energy crisis. Pakistan's government has implemented rolling blackouts across the country and earlier this year government officials announced that it will take at least seven years to build up electrical generation capacity to support the entire country. The black outs have taken a huge economic toll on Pakistan's textile industry and have resulted in plant shutdowns and layoffs.

Any U.S. aid will doubtless have a fair percentage of its money "diverted" – President Zadari, when merely Prime Minister Bennazir Bhutto's husband, was known as "Mr. Ten Percent" for his alleged take on foreign projects.

That said, the issue remains one of "hearts and minds," as the U.S., according to Holbrooke's comments, now increasingly view the "Ak-Pak" theater of military operations as a unified one.

So, what can Islamabad offer its disaffected population to support the central authorities?

Electricity and access to water could go a long way towards convincing incipient jihadis that their government does indeed care, and that supporting it as opposed to tacking it could produce further benefits.

Consider – the Obama administration for fiscal year 2012 is requesting \$120 billion for military operations in Afghanistan, a figure which pales into insignificance alongside the modest \$1 billion allocated to complete Pakistan's Diamer-Bhasha dam.

While doubtless a significant amount of this aid will disappear down Pakistani corruption ratholes (surprise), it would still seem on balance a bargain in every sense of the word, as jihadis could stay at home, read to their children after dark and cook their dinners, and electricity and water would seem to be more amenable elements in winning Pakistani "hearts and minds" than further Predator UAV strikes.

Something to think about.

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